

## Interview with Joan Deason

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

JOAN DEASON

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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*Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Thursday, November 21, 1991, interviewing Joan Deason at my home in Washington, DC.*

Could you talk a little bit about your Foreign Service background? You started in Pretori(Deason confirms) so the obvious question is, how is it to live with apartheid?

DEASON: It was, really, a constant stress. Particularly because I felt it was so important that my children accept everyone as equals. Even though we did our very best, the inequalities were constantly glaring. Every time we went to a park, it was “for whites only”, every time we used the facilities it was “whites only.” Even the beaches — we have pictures — where everyone was classified. They never reported anything in the newspaper without a long description of “who” this person was — white, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic — it wasn't just the coloreds and the non-whites, they classified all of us. So you became a classified person whether you wanted to or not.

*Q: How old were your children at that time?*

DEASON: I had a newborn and a three-year-old.

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*Q: So it wasn't too significant — less so than it might have been if they were, say, 15 and 17?*

DEASON: Well, according to modern theory of development, (both laughing) that's the most important stage.

*Q: Well, (she laughs) I must question that in this case. Did they have a black nursemaid?*

DEASON: Of course, oh yes. I was desperate for help there because demands on my time were extensive, and I didn't know how to manage enough to say, "I'm sorry, I'm busy." I noticed at that time it was assumed that children were just as well off with nannies even though they weren't trained nannies as we like to think of them. So you were required to leave them for long periods of time.

*Q: That was 1967-69, before the '72 directive. What were those demands on your time?*

DEASON: Well, you did as the Ambassador's wife requested. Which was really nice, she was not demanding, I never had one of those traditional people that they talk about. But I became very competitive. I'd been a professional before, and even though I had children I worked. Before my husband joined the Foreign Service we'd been married ten years and I worked the whole time. Originally I was a medical technologist. After my first child came, I was pressured and my boss requested me to work part-time, so I had continuous work up until the time we left the U.S.

Suddenly I went from being a rather exceptional woman (she laughs) for my time and place to being totally helpless, because I didn't have any domestic skills. And everything was done from scratch, and everything was done beautifully. My dress in California had been very simple, and suddenly I had no clothes, we didn't have sufficient silverware and china and crystal and all the things people were expected to have.

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I was doubly intimidated because I quickly learned that administrative people were second-class citizens at that time. My husband was in on a pilot program that brought in well educated and skilled administrative people. It was a new program, they took in only a few people, but basically the attitude was that they were second-class citizens, that they didn't mix very well with the Officer class. So I was constantly proving myself, I think, in all ways. That took a lot of time and energy, and it took away from the family and that's one of my great regrets — how I spent that time.

*Q: If it's any comfort, you are not alone in those feelings of second-class citizenship because of your husband's position in the Service, that's not at all unusual.*

DEASON: I imagine it's not, but the thing that bothers me the most to this day is that I still see myself in his shadow. Even though I've done a great deal, accomplished a great deal, I'm still his wife and I find myself moving back and forth as his expedient — (she laughs) if I'm not treated correctly, I will suddenly remind people that I'm who my husband is.

*Q: You're speaking about in the Service now?*

DEASON: Yes. Because, basically, there is a class system still. I think it's breaking down a bit but I find that I'm very uncomfortable if I'm treated as a second-class citizen. I've had too much of this —

*Q: Absolutely. Why should you be?*

DEASON: (she laughs) Well, I think I should be a little more humble and self-controlled. But no one in the Foreign Service says, "Who are you, and what do you do?" They say, "What does your husband do?" So basically I don't have a chance —

*Q: Basically, you mean when you're abroad?*

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DEASON: Yes. [At dinners] you sit next to fascinating people, of course, and I have learned to help them talk about themselves, which is one reason I think I might be good at this. Because nobody was ever interested in the wife.

*Q: Interesting. It seems to me that you're enough younger than I am so that a lot of that would have gone by the board, but there it still is. Right?*

DEASON: Oh, I think every experience stays in your heart. It's a significant experience, the first year abroad.

*Q: Well, to be a reflection of your husband's position when you are accustomed to being your own person, that must be very difficult.*

DEASON: Not only that. It's the role model you present to your children. I've tried so hard to teach my son particularly, but they behave as they seem, and if you think about the time he was three and four years old, learning what a man does and how a daddy acts, I was being a very traditional, in fact almost a subservient, woman. And that's how he sees women today even in this modern age, and he's not aware of it.

*Q: Your children are both boys?*

DEASON: No, I have a daughter, the older one.

*Q: In Pretoria were there uprisings, in that early time?*

DEASON: Actually, the trauma was before we went. We originally were assigned to Addis Ababa and, as I said, I had a newborn. We had sent everything to Addis via air and sea freight when the '67 War erupted, freezing the Canal and all the ports around there; shipping was backed up to I don't know how far in South Africa. So the baby things finally arrived in Addis and they refused to send them down to "white Africa," s(she laughs) the

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baby had outgrown literally most of his clothes, and he never got to use his playpen and his crib — it took about nine months to get the things. A slow adjustment.

*Q: And then on to Dhahran.*

DEASON: Well, that was like a new beginning for me. My husband desperately wanted to get out of B&F — he was a Budget and Fiscal Officer — and the only post he could get was a hardship post where he could be an Admin Officer. So we went to Dhahran in fear and trepidation. There was a 20% or 25% differential and it turned out to be “the golden sandbox.” It changed my life completely, because when we were going to this remote post I thought, “I’m going to learn how to teach my children. Who knows what the schools will be like in these remote places that we’re going to have to go while my husband is working himself up the ladder?”

I took a little training in Washington and I ended up teaching in a nursery school for three months before my husband went abroad, while he was in training. When I got to Dhahran, the first-grade teacher quit. I wasn’t really qualified to teach first-grade, but my daughter was entering first-grade so I had an interest in the matter. So I was asked to take the class of non-English-speaking children, because they had seen I had some skills working with childre(she laughs) and those non-English-speaking children wouldn’t have a great need to read for quite a while while they were learning English.

So I sat in in the Aramco schools for three weeks with the best first-grade schoolteacher I have ever seen before or since, and I learned how to teach first grade. And it opened new doors to me. I have been a teacher of some sort ever since. It changed my life, but I never learned it formally until later, so I did everything the scientific way, which I was trained to do. I developed a lot of interesting programs, using the local resources, and those skills have stayed with me and I’ve been able to build on them ever since.

*Q: Did you go back for formal training?*

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DEASON: It was very difficult because we were never in one place long enough. But after Dhahran — the golden sandbox as we called it — we'd accumulated enough to buy a house in Washington; and I had been working. So I went to school. But we didn't stay long enough for me to finish. I think it's wonderful that now they have that wonderful fast-track program. By working abroad I had managed to get a school to sponsor me for a credential, so I have enough for a Master's and I got a credential.

*Q: Had you done your MA in Human Relations before you went into the Service?*

DEASON: No, I did that later — I finished about three years ago. When I learned to plan life a little better, we aimed for a post where they had an extension program that was interesting to me. So I studied in Korea where they had an on-site program, they brought in professors, it was a good program, I enjoyed it. That would have been in '88 or '89, I can't remember exactly.

*Q: And then your BA from USC — “primary teacher, cross-cultural trainee.” That's interesting.*

DEASON: That was in August '58.

*Q: So you taught first-grade in Dhahran?*

DEASON: I did, the whole time.

*Q: And had adequate care for the children?*

DEASON: Oh, well, I had one in school and I was teaching the same grade that she was in. And there was a nursery school, and my house man was thrilled to earn a little extra money keeping the child for a few hours until I got home. The school was on the compound, so we walked back and forth and it was very much a family activity. It was the best job I've ever had for including the family.

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*Q: How was compound living there — you couldn't drive in Saudi Arabia, could you?*

DEASON: For that I was a fluke, too. In Dhahran they had given permission for the female employees to drive, so I could drive a stretch between the airbase and Aramco and the compound was in the center, and that actually got me to what I needed to have — the swimming pool, the dry-cleaners and that kind of thing. But it was a hair-raising experience, because as soon as they saw a female was driving they would stare and swerve towards you, so it was kind of a dangerous run, you had to be very careful.

But they took the privilege away from us midway through our tour and that was very difficult because my husband was not used to supporting me with the driving. I have very vivid memories of one night when we couldn't get a ride to the movie and my son lay in the middle of the street and screamed and nothing happened.

*Q: But when the privileges were taken away, the Embassy must have made some . . .*

DEASON: They made no provision; none. What they do in those posts — I've been back, to Jeddah, and of course there was no such privilege and we had [Embassy] runs. They would take you into town to buy groceries and fresh thingBut basically they didn't provide the service you needed for the dry-cleaning, and the pool — we had no pool in those days and the women really did have to find someone to drive them. And if your husband is extremely busy, as mine was, you're quite helpless.

*Q: Did you all not consider pooling together and hiring a Saudi driver? Or was that out of the question?*

DEASON: Nothing was out of the question, the question was whose car was he going to drive. If you'd seen the way they drove, you'd prefer to have your car safely in the driveway.

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*Q: But I would think it would have been so confining, not being able to drive and living in the compound, having the school in the compound . . .*

DEASON: Well, I loved it because I had a lot to do, I was a new teacher, so that took a lot of time. And we did a great deal of entertaining, that was all we had. In those days they didn't have a restaurant off the compound, so we did everything for ourselves. And the children were there with other children and basically protected. And I thought it was rather nice — there was much less stress than in posts where you're driving them here and there, taking them places. We were a family unit in the compound. Not that there weren't problem.

*Q: There would have to be problems in a tight situation like that I would think.*

DEASON: Everyone knew what everyone else was doing. And there were hostilities. We knew too much about one another.

*Q: Can't be helped.*

DEASON: Well, we also had an interest in the situation in that three senior wives had left their husbands. That was quite remarkable! (she laughs) So we didn't have kind of that leadership role which was normally provided at that time. I was the ranking spouse at post, and you could see how junior I was on the second tour.

*Q: But what good experience — or did that figure in at all?*

DEASON: This was really the beginning of “emancipation” before emancipation was declared. People had had it. And there was also great controversy because the lowest-ranking people had the largest families, and the higher-ranking people had the really only adequate homes — the third bedroom and the second bath. And you had bachelors in the three top homes! Who was entitled to the space?

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It was also an interesting point because we're looking at it now, when bachelors don't entertain, really. So the homes basically weren't used for the purpose they were intended.

*Q: But by the same token, in Saudi Arabia they had nowhere to go to entertain, did they?*

DEASON: Oh, we had a huge foreign community.

*Q: But you said there were no restaurants, if they didn't entertain at home, they couldn't go out.*

DEASON: Oh yes, that was all we did, entertain at home.

*Q: So your ranking bachelors, when they did something representational, did you do it?*

DEASON: Sometimes. But normally, no, they had their cooks do it. But they were very modest and simple and everyone applauded, "Oh, what a good effort they're making." (both laugh heartily)

*Q: If a spouse had been there, expectations would have tripled, of course. (both laughing)*

DEASON: Oh, indeed.

*Q: And then you came back to Washington in the time of the '72 directive. Did you take part in any of that? Were you aware of what was going on?*

DEASON: I never knew what was going on. I've always been kind of isolated from information for some reason, even though my husband's been very good about it. Maybe I got it and it didn't impact. I became very self-directed at that time, I had the children, the house, and the schooling to take care of, and I knew we weren't going to be there very long. So my life was pretty focused. Because I'm happier in the States than most Foreign Service people, I find, I'm fulfilled here.

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*Q: Is this the house that you bought at that time, the one in Arlington?*

DEASON: I have another house now. It was a very modest home. We upgraded in the 80s.

*Q: I would think you'd be a "natural" to be right in there [on the 72 Directive].*

DEASON: I didn't know about the American Association of Foreign Service Wives until I was employed by FLO as a Support Services Officer. One of the board members came in and said, "You cannot have this job unless you're a member of AAFSW. So I jolly quick became a member, and I became liaison, so I went to their board meetings. That's when I realized the scope of what they were doing and the calibre of people there, and I realized that I had to make a contribution.

*Q: Was that in the 80s?*

DEASON: Yes.

*Q: So you had the short time in Washington. You must have been working during that time, in the 70s.*

DEASON: No, I went to school. I spent full time with the children. The little one was now only in kindergarten, so you just turn around twice and he's home again, and it's very expensive, and the salary wasn't that good. That was a very costly time, so I stayed home pretty much.

*Q: And then went off to Stockholm — I hope to re-reap your fortune?*

DEASON: Well, I may have been emancipated but the idea of searching for work was relatively new. But I've always thought my identity lay in what I did, so I started to advertise myself as a tutor for remedial reading because I did have skills in that area. I was hired, and from that word of mouth I became an English teacher in the Swedish system. In

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Sweden, every child who has at least one parent whose mother tongue is not Swedish is entitled to training in that language. So I got into that system, a wonderful opportunity. Low pay.

*Q: But still, you were there for quite a while, too.*

DEASON: I was. When you get into a good thing you stay. My husband was happy. I got one of the first PIT jobs for six months in the Consular section. Then when I was talking every chance I got, about what I did here and there, the doctor that worked at the Embassy found out that I was a medical technologist. Normally one could never qualify for that unless you speak the language and you take the exams, which are very rigorous, but they were nationalizing all the private laboratories and they were desperate for help. So they asked me, without any language or any local training, and that brought me up-to-date. I'd been "obsolete" because I'd been away from it for ten years. And that led to my really big job in Saudi Arabia, because my benchmate had worked inside Saudi Arabia for an American firm based in California and I have a California license, (she laughs) so that's how I got to Saudi Arabia.

*Q: But how interesting that you have been able, more or less — and I'd say more rather than less — to sort of move ahead with career development.*

DEASON: Well, I don't know if any more than others who have that advantage.

*Q: Oh, I would say yes.*

DEASON: Stockholm was an interesting point for me because I was also president of the Women's Club. I was working all angles, and I was also head of the Girl Scout program. They had established an American Girl Scout program, and I was totally burned out when I left there. I'd had some very unpleasant experiences in the volunteer community. There was a lot of nastiness and backbiting and the final blow came when I was just about to

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leave and was called by the American Scouting organization and asked to put together a group of Scouts because they wanted U.S. attendance at the Jamboree.

Well, Swedish Jamborees are fabulous, nothing better. However, they're also not segregated — Boy and Girl Scouts together. (she laughs) So I quickly put together a group because I knew it would be a fabulous opportunity. I couldn't lead them but I found an 18-year-old girl who'd been there as an exchange student, who spoke the language, and she belonged to the church so we assumed she had good moral standards. When it got out that I wasn't going, I was really accused of "immoral behavior" in encouraging these children in that behavior. And it bothered me a great deal because I had a daughter attending at the same time and it seemed like that in four years I had proved the kind of person I was, and because I knew what Scouting was: there was no encouragement, they were segregated, actually, for sleeping, and this was monitored but nobody talked to me about it, nobody was interested. It got so that when I walked into a room the conversation stopped. It was really an experience for me. I still volunteer but it's always colored by "I'm being judged and I may not be judged correctly, or even fairly."

*Q: Amazing. I've just finished Sissela Bok's biography of her mother Alva Myrdal, all about Sweden, about her development from a Swedish farm girl to Nobel Peace prizewinner, and she mentions the relationship between young Swedes of both sexes, which is completely relaxed.*

DEASON: Oh, it is.

*Q: And so different from ours. I can see how the American community would react to that. But how horrible to be caught in the middle of it.*

DEASON: Also, sexuality was flagrant there. I can't even describe the billboards and the magazine covers. It was over-stimulating to my young children, who became overly aware of sex when basically they would probably be oblivious to it for a few more years. So we had sex training a lot earlier than we would have and towards the end of our stay there the

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Swedes themselves realized that this was not healthy for the children and they changed everything — they put covers on the magazines, they took condoms out of the candy section, they did a lot to clean it up, but it was too late.

*Q: Do you think this had any long-lasting untoward effect on your children? Or did they just learn earlier?*

DEASON: I think they just learned earlier. I wonder about other children, though; I don't know.

*Q: So maybe the Swedes were wrong — maybe they should have left it like it was. (she laughs)*

DEASON: Well, they had a lot to commend them — “Make love, not war.” I thought it interesting, they didn't even have violence. The film “Bambi” was not shown, for instance, because there was violence in it and the fire was considered too traumatic for children. Yet they would do full intercourse on the TV at five o'clock. So I was having to spend a lot of time screening, because they loved watching TV.

*Q: In English or in Swedish?*

DEASON: In Swedish.

*Q: How old were they then?*

DEASON: Four years and six. Our daughter was in 4th grade and finished 7th grade.

*Q: But young enough to pick it up adequately.*

DEASON: Yes.

*Q: Really, I'm whizzing you through this, but then you went back to Saudi Arabia?*

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DEASON: By choice. We asked for that assignment.

*Q: Another “hardship” and 25% differential?*

DEASON: No. It was professionally good for my husband, and I thought I could get a job in medical technology. So we went for it, and the school was supposed to be excellent.

*Q: Did you work for the Saudi government or for a U.S. company?*

DEASON: A U.S. company that was working for the Saudi military. I was a medical technologist, and it turned out that even though I was dated, I didn't know much about equipment, the electricity was always going off, so I set up their manual program, i.e., doing the test by hand just for the backup. But it was a wonderful experience. It was an international team and it was “Saudi-izing” at the time. My cross-cultural training really came in handy, because there was so much conflict between the different groups — even the Western groups. They had different pay scales, you were paid in the scale of your country, so Americans of course were at the top of the scale, Europeans were lower, Brits were much lower and frustrating for some of them.

We saw corruption. We saw people die through ignorance, we feeling very helpless. I was there for the Mecca crisis when terrorists took over the Great Mosque and I think I never had so much pride in American training as at that time, because it was American nurses that took over, had had some experience with wounds and battle conditions and put our hospital in order and made it possible for us to receive the wounded, who were in terrible shape. Only Moslems were allowed to enter Mecca, so that meant their basic care was not Western care and it really was primitive. So we had quite a challenge and I was happy I was there contributing. I was in charge of the blood bank, which meant you “drew” every day. In other words, there was no blood bank in Saudi Arabia, and the Western community was especially good about contributing [donating a unit of blood].

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*Q: Now, have you built on that job? It seems to me you're doing something quite different. Then you came back to Washington.*

DEASON: Well, I think you build on everything because when you're doing your resume and you have a goal, I did cross-cultural training there as part of my job and I did things I could now incorporate into the resume.

*Q: Now, we're at 1980, '82. We have the Foreign Service Act of 1980. Did that have any effect on you?*

DEASON: No impact, none at all.

*Q: You were probably too young, not near enough to the end of your career to be overtly affected by that at the time. Then what did you do when you were here?*

DEASON: My husband was asked to take a very important, interesting job in the Department and he cut short his tour in Jeddah. I was very distressed because I'd always dreamed that my daughter would attend my alma mater, and one had a boarding school allowance there. And it was a good school for my son, who had some learning problems; and I was professionally in line for directorship of that laboratory, and I had a good houseful of help and everything was gung ho, and he pulled us up out of there in a very short time. So I came back: my son had a terrible adjustment period, he came back in December into 7th grade, and he was really mistreated physically and mentally in his Arlington public school. I still cry for him when I think of those days and he cries for himself, the pain. That changed his personality. He's well adjusted today but I can never forgive myself for the pain he went through. I always swore I would never put the kids in school after it started, we would always be there in plenty of time, but this was not one.

*Q: Well, it was your husband's chance to . . .*

DEASON: Do something worth-while.

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*Q: And he was still the principal wage-earner.*

DEASON: He was, indeed.

*Q: But you soon went to Beijing. Not for some two years?*

DEASON: I brooded, I had a hard time brooding, and my husband talked me into applying for the FLO job. I didn't even know what FLO was, so completely out of everything! So I applied, and as you can see I have quite an interesting eclectic background and they were intrigued by it, so I had the job. I couldn't complete my two-year assignment with them.

*Q: Which meant that you're not eligible for — what is it?*

DEASON: They didn't have that eligibility provision then, they were working on it.

*Q: What did you do?*

DEASON: I was Support Services Officer, a position that was developed to support evacuees and their families in situations of death, disaster and divorce, “the three D's” established at the time when there was a huge outflow from the Arabic countries at the time the hostages were taken in Iran. So we had a huge number of people to support. That was ending when I was hired, so I spent a lot of time trying to do worth-while things of a supportive nature and still be alert in case we should have another crisis.

I developed the RAF Course — the Regulations Allowance and Finances with OBC and with the AAFSW. I developed a program to enable finding out what is available in accredited adult education in English at every post in the world. I was also the counselor for SMA — Separate Maintenance Allowance, which was brand-new at the time, and I did the first comprehensive study of who was taking it. That was very hard to do. We make a lot of statements in the Foreign Service — we have a higher divorce rate, people are leaving in droves.

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*Q: Do we still have a higher divorce rate now that the national level is 50%?*

DEASON: Nobody knows. That's not documented, but the study was to find out who was taking this [SMA], because they thought it was promoting family separation and then divorce, so I did the study. It was very difficult to get the data but I found out — I bet you can't guess: who take SMA? It was college students whose parents were posted in Europe. In those days the cost of transportation between the East Coast and Europe was just a few hundred dollars, so basically you were ahead if you took SMA for your college student child and got that allowance and paid for the trip yourself. It was never intended for that, and relatively few women were taking it then, and most of them were taking it for short periods — we had birth of babies, and finishing up courses, and closing the house, but basically we didn't have many who said they were staying back to work.

*Q: Interesting. Well, that was ten years ago.*

DEASON: I don't know what it is now.

*Q: Actually, what was the purpose of SMA? To come home and have a baby? Or come home with a learning-disabled child?*

DEASON: Well, Congress mandated it because they said that the stress on families at posts where American diplomats were being hassled and threatened was so great that we should allow families to leave if they felt it necessary. This was before they would actually declare that families should leave, without a formal declaration. So you had the option. I think that two people among the 180 that I surveyed had left for that reason.

*Q: So really the Separate Maintenance has been abused from the start?*

DEASON: It's been adjusted to meet the needs of the Service as I quickly discovered. That's the bureaucratic way to save! (both laugh heartily) I learned the bureaucratic way quickly. I'm so glad I had that experience, because I suddenly understood where my

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husband was coming from and what my entitlements were and how to work with the system. Training people to do that has been a goal. It's not easy to do.

*Q: I worked as CLO during my husband's last two years. If I had known during my 30 years in the Service what I learned in those two years at the Embassy in Trinidad, I would have been so much better off, and happier.*

DEASON: How?

*Q: Well, I would have known the system.*

DEASON: You would have understood?

*Q: Of course. Understood the system and the unemployed spouse being not involved in the Mission. I don't know how you could have profited from that, but you might have understood more.*

DEASON: One of the things that's really important to me: as a dependent spouse in either the private or federal sector, we become very dependent on our husbands and very sensitive to all the nuances that are involved with work in general, whereas basically when I have my own job I don't worry, I don't feel so vulnerable. And I find that women who are terribly involved take things terribly personal that happen to their husbands, when basically that's the way life is and they need another focus.

*Q: But that's a reflection of the Foreign Service life. Your identity is so tied up with his. I mean, it's interesting: I did not realize that this facet of the Foreign Service spouse personality was there. It has come up time and time again in interviews. Were you willing to talk about feeling as a second-class citizen at posts abroad?*

DEASON: Well, in my training as I went through, I guess by the 70s I was starting to look at myself and learning how to express myself, and that was a very lonely existence because nobody really wanted to address it. Maybe with friends now and then, but even

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then it was difficult. Because learning how to explore your feelings and your needs is an art and we need training in that. OBC is always asking what can you do — that would be good, but it has to continue, you can't just have a short course in looking at ourselves and studying goals and understanding one's self unless you can continue to build on that skill abroad; and there's no vehicle.

I tried to put together a group for children of alcoholic parents. I was not comfortable talking in that group at all, so it just did not work in that close environment, we don't trust each other all that much.

*Q: No, of course not. Because it could so easily be a reflection on the Officer's career.*

DEASON: And it can be used against you.

*Q: I can understand that. So, what did you do in Beijing?*

DEASON: In Beijing I did so much I could hardly breathe. It was traumatic for me to go there, because I left both children behind. The son was 15, in boarding school, he had flunked 9th grade; his dyslexia had never been dealt with. We finally diagnosed it and got him into a special six-weeks school and found a boarding school with a support component. Our daughter entered university. And off we went to this post where there was no communications — three weeks one way for mail, telephone conversations were almost impossible, there was so much static on the line. I had no idea our daughter would need us as much as she apparently did that first year at university. Even though she'd had boarding school she found it difficult. She went to University of Virginia, we were so pleased that she was there. Our son was in Kent Hill, Maine. We have no family, no support, holidays were traumatic every single time in finding a place for them to go. There was not the support you basically need — you should no(she laughs) rush abroad leaving your children behind unless you have more than we did.

*Q: Not that far away.*

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DEASON: Oh, indeed. It was really far away. I had a job in advance as a first-grade teacher. Even though it was mid-year I went right into that job, they had a vacancy. I was asked to do all sorts of programs because I came from the FLO. So I directed the mental health program, always when they couldn't find someone. My husband is the Admin Officer and he hates to have me involved with anything having to do with Admin. I did the CLO for three months and I was finally asked to set up a laboratory for them — this is all simultaneously, mind you — in the health unit they were building. Setting up a laboratory for them was quite a challenge on top of all this. I was really tired at the end, that was a lot of stress.

*Q: That was a long post.*

DEASON: Yes, four years. We were trying to pay for college then, get some debts out of the way.

*Q: That's another thing I've never addressed in any interview — well, I haven't interviewed too many people of your generation, we've focused on the older ones for obvious reasons. And in those years when our children are in prep school or college and perhaps need us the most, we're overseas because we're trying to maintain the educational standard that they have.*

DEASON: That's right, it's another drawback.

*Q: It is indeed, because I would say the average Foreign Service family cannot bring the child home and put him in a prep school or a private girls' school for high school years, [similar to] the small elitist school they may have gone to overseas.*

DEASON: Well, we did. Our daughter just said she couldn't cope with high school, so we put her in St. Agnes. But basically it's been my good fortune to be married to someone with a Master's in finance. He manages well, and when I started in FLO I said I was going to do this financial program, and I was flooded with people coming in for private counseling,

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and I became quickly aware that people didn't know how to manage money. I think that the Foreign Service transient life exacerbates the problem. Here, if you stay in one place and buy a home and don't have those transient expenses and can see the future a little more clearly, you can manage better. But transfer is expensive, home leave is expensive, it seems like such a great idea but not everybody can move in with their family. "I sit by the seashore." So there is a great need to really understand money.

*Q: You said you had no family, what did you do for home leaves?*

DEASON: (laughing) It was awful. We just went around and visited people mostly; it was terrible. We tried to see the United States in a teardrop trailer with our dog and cat and two children and 700 pounds of air freight. We did have family but they were much older and they could only take us for a week or so, it was a great strain for them even though they loved us. It was not an emotional time but it was difficult. So it was never pleasant. I don't remember any home leave with happiness with the children. And then later, when the parents became ill and we're in China it was the most awful period of my life. Between the children's needs, my mother-in-law developed Alzheimer's, it was just awful trying to support so many people from so far away. I got so tired of planes. I have a phobia about suitcases — I guess I sound like a real nut case, but basically I haven't been able to take a vacation, even, for years because basically I didn't want to pack a suitcase. I was so tired.

*Q: You came back just last year?*

DEASON: Yes.

*Q: Your husband still has a number of years to go, so will you be going out again?*

DEASON: No. He is as far as he can go, unless he's named Ambassador or Career Minister, which they're not doing too much of any more, he will probably be leaving in about three years.

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*Q: But meanwhile you have established yourself at . . .*

DEASON: I finally found a job at State in Refugee Programs as a Staff Development Officer. It was supposed to be full-time. It's a difficult time for me professionally, really, because it's a brand-new concept and people aren't accustomed to working with it or with me, and it's taking a long time to get established. I'm tire(laughing) of reestablishing! It's a double burden. I keep saying, "Oh, I'm grown up now." (laughing again) Not really, not really...

*Q: Absolutely! So, in addition to that part-time job, are you chair of the [AAFSW] Forum Committee?*

DEASON: Co-chair.

*Q: And on Saturday — explai[she reads] "AAFS Source Constituency and Their Needs" — is that the form I filled out and sent back?*

DEASON: Yes. I appreciate your filling it out.

*Q: And are you going to use those forms as a basis for discussions, or . . .*

DEASON: Well, we'll have the audience participation which will generate ideas. My concern as the forum chairman is that nothing is really happening. People are not clearly defining their needs. If you could read the forms, you'd find them really sketchy. We need jobs, we need support, we need spouse compensation. They really haven't pinpointed their real needs. If you want a job you can scrub a floor. I don't think that's what people need. There's a difference in a job and a career and building and whether we just need a little extra money because we feel poor — I haven't found them defining it, so I decided this just might be a vehicle to get more specific direction.

*Q: Then what will you do with that information that comes out of it?*

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DEASON: Well, hopefully once you know, then you can make that decision. I have several ideas. One is for automated communication systems. It's going to be a huge expense and will need a grant, but we're in the stone age, to tell you the truth, in the way we, AAFSW, is trying to communicate and we're not doing it effectively. We're not meeting the need, particularly by younger people.

*Q: Does AAFSW even have a computer?*

DEASON: Oh, no. Even the Newsletter is done all by hand and then taken to a printer. We have to submit our copy two months in advance, so getting the current data is kind of frustrating, so I would like to see us do a desktop publishing.

*Q: I would think that if Leslie Ariettis willing, AAFSW should buy her a desktop publishing program.*

DEASON: That's one of our goals, I'm bringing it up. Also, we could feed in data on our membership, so that when we want to talk about child care we can draw up the names of those who are in that category. Or if people have special interests we can really pinpoint needs and maybe get people involved. Right now we're giving these "blanket" announcements in publications and not getting much response.

*Q: I have a FileMakerPro data base program which I will be very happy to share with AAFSW if in exchange someone will come and put data in my machine. (both laugh) I think the program is \$500.*

DEASON: I think we have to explore our needs precisely and I don't have that background, though I appreciate what you've just said. [tape turned off as they discuss some details irrelevant to interview]

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*Q: I think one of the problems of living abroad just now is that the computer age is passing Foreign Service women by, and they come back and it's amazing how defensive people are when they're "threatened" by a computer.*

DEASON: I know — I'm one of them.

*Q: Oh, no! If you can type you can work a computer.*

DEASON: I know that now because I was forced to do it, but I do know how frightened you can be and how difficult it is to overcome that fear.

*Q: Yes. And the reason I learned was because they offered computer training on WANG at the Embassy at Trinidad, and because I was in the FLO office; I think they offered it to spouses, too, on a space-available basis, but because I was in FLO I had one of the first choices. And I went right up [to Admin] and learned how and I was fascinated.*

DEASON: And you're addicted, aren't you? (both laugh) I can't live without it!

*Q: Absolutely addicted. There was a time when FLO was denigrating computer training, because they put it in a support system category. You can be vercost-efficient . . .*

DEASON: Oh, indeed, it's a marvelous thing at all levels. Well, I was the one who pushed for the WANG in FLO. I left before it happened but I started that whole concept. I think we all need to move into this age of information.

*Q: Absolutely. So where are you going to take AAFSW after this forum meeting gives you all this information?*

DEASON: A lot depends on what comes out. You can stand back and say this is what they need but it only works if people see the need themselves. And many of our members and many of our most influential members are older and have been retired for a long time.

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Q: *That's too bad.*

DEASON: Well, and influential. And our of respect for them, because they've contributed so much, we feel we're in kind of a double-bind in terms of how firm can you be in changing things and disrupting people?

Q: *I'm one of those retired people. I would love to come and share my experience with you but I don't feel I'm the person to be making decisions at this point, because it's not my life any more. But what I do at FSI when I talk four times a year to the "Introduction to the Foreign Service" course is to tell listeners how it was, not what they should do now. Then I'm followed always by Maryann Minutillo or Kendall Montgomery who say, "Well, now that you've heard what your legacy is and where you're coming from, here's what we think you can do about it now."*

DEASON: I have trouble with this approach, because everyone sees life from where they are. Where you stand depends on where you've sat. (she laughs) And I think the variety of feelings and the description of how things are is so personal, it's very difficult to share it in a way that people can truly understand the vast scope of opportunities and sensations that might be available.

Q: *They have to experience it.*

DEASON: I don't think you can say how it is. You can say how it was for you.

Q: *What FLO does is give the options, in their talk — "here's the way you can handle the situation like this." I think I sat through it only once, possibly twice, and the first time Maryann had forgotten she was to speak that day, I admired her immensely, she did it right off the top of her head. And then the other time I guess I did pay a little closer attention and she gave herself as an example on how you can build a career. Which is about all you can do, really.*

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DEASON: Well, I think we also should do more with exploring how these women accomplish what they accomplish. I have been watching very carefully and finding that too many women whom I consider successful have spent a great deal of time in the States versus living abroad. That gives you an opportunity to learn more and to establish yourself professionally, and to become known for your skills. Those who have moved and followed the traditional life have other problems.

But apparently there are women who've managed in spite of it, and I'm very eager to find them and bring them together to explore what they've done and how they've approached the opportunities.

*Q: And I hope those are the women that you'll interview and share those interviews with us.*

DEASON: I'd love to. I would love you to tell me when you need someone to . . .

*Q: Well, we would like them immediately. Someone like Maryann Minutillo comes to mind. I've tried to interview her, she's always so busy. I don't know Kendall Montgomery, perhaps she's one. Nancy Horan — I don't know, women like that, I think, would be very fine if you could pin them down for a couple of hours.*

DEASON: Again: some women spend a lot of time here.

*Q: But that should come out, you see. One of the Foreign Service wives that people frequently point to is Joy Zimmerman in the theater.*

DEASON: Oh, I saw her written up, she's at Arena Stage.

*Q: I don't know where she is but I think she's been here for something like 12 years. I admire what she's done at Arena and I don't mean to denigrate her success in any way but I don't consider her a Foreign Service wife.*

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DEASON: That's something we need to look at. (Fenzi agrees) There are women who are getting both. I taught career life planning for the transient dependents and I moved it from the Foreign Service into the private sector when I was in Korea. I was starting to explore the maldependent spouse, who has a very different approach, and I started looking at two career couples, not two Government workers, only one being in the Foreign Service, and seeing how they had developed, and was sure it's possible. But you have got to establish yourself professionally before you start this moving. Once you are well established the world is yours, there are many opportunities.

*Q: No matter where you go?*

DEASON: Oh yes.

*Q: Because you've been to some pretty tough places.*

DEASON: I could see how as a PhD in sociology and anthropology, which I had originally wanted to major in — my mother said there was no money in it — could have provided rich opportunities. I've been in three cultures that are changing from rural to urban development, tribal peoples moving into cities and losing their culture and taking on new values — what a wonderful opportunity to do some exciting research! And as a dependent spouse I could have done exciting research projects many professionals could never find funding for, and I would have been living in relative comfort at the same time. I could see opportunities, but you have to have the skills and learn how to set priorities if you're going to take full advantage of all Foreign Service life has to offer.

*Q: So it's really better to have your advanced degree in some established and then go out . . .*

DEASON: People should take advantage of every opportunity they have for education.

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*Q: Because you are in an ideal situation overseas with household help, and at this point in life not having children to occupy . . .*

DEASON: Even when I had small children to help combat the loneliness.

*Q: And as you say, you're taken care of financially. And you can generate income, I'm sure.*

DEASON: I met a very interesting man who is a PhD, so he works six months of the year in his university, a tenured professor, and he spends the other six months doing things that the average professor could never do in his whole life, exploring the cultures that his wife is serving. And he says he's busier abroad than he is at home. And he's generated a lot of material, a lot of publications, and he's better known than he probably would have been if he'd stayed at his post in the university.

*Q: I'm sorry, I probably won't come on Saturday, because even if I get my walking cast[temporary limitation with ankle fracture] my husband would have to drive me and all that. I will hope to come to the next meeting.*

DEASON: It takes place annually, but we have committees throughout the year and this is sort of the culmination of a year's work. In this case, we're trying to set goals for the coming year.

My other idea by the way — I'm just going to work at AAFSW one year, it's all I can do because I'm really burned out. I would like the organization to have a physical place of its own. I would like to see us buy a house close to the Foreign Service Institute so we'd have a shuttle going back and forth; where we could set up a daycare for the transients and evacuees — those who come back unexpectedly and need that support — and have a place for meetings, a kitchen. I just think we need a place, with parking.

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*Q: I think you need a place, too. And may we have a small corner? (both laugh) I have asked AAFSW time and time again, and I realize they haven't been in a position to do anything about it, to please include a little corner for this project in their planning for space.*

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### BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Robert G. Deason

Spouse's Position: Administration

Spouse Entered Service:1/67Left Service: You Entered Service:1/67Left Service:

Status: Spouse of FSO

Posts: 1967-69Pretoria, South Africa 1969-71Dhahran, Saudi Arabia 1971-73Washington, DC 1973-77Stockholm, Sweden 1978-79Jeddah, Saudi Arabia 1979-82Washington, DC 1982-86Beijing, China 1986-90Seoul, Korea 1990-presWashington, DC

Place/Date of birth: San Francisco, California, January 2, 1936

Maiden Name: Dunkel

Parents (Name, Profession):

Leonard Dunkel - Pacific Tel and Tel Engineer, Brig. Gen., Army Reserves

Mildred Furst - housewife

Schools (Prep, University):

U of Southern California, BS, Clinical Technologist (1958)

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U of Oklahoma, MA, Human Relations (1988-89)

Profession: Clinical Technologist, Primary Teacher, Cross Cultural Trainee

Date/Place of Marriage: December 27, 1958, La Jolla, California

Children:

Duane Robert (1/67)

Daryl Ann (2/64)

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: A. At Post: Stockholm - President, American Women's Club; Visa Clerk (paid); Clinical Technologist Jeddah - Clinical Technologist Beijing - Clinical Technologist Teacher in Dhahran, Stockholm, Beijing, Seoul

B. In Washington, DC: Support Services Officer, FLO; Staff Division Officer, Refugee Program

End of interview